

Title: **The Secrets We Keep**

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Chapter 1: The Secrets We Keep

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Dawn was sitting on the floor in her room, her knees curled up to her chest, her back to the door, her head bowed, tears slowly, silently tracing their way down her cheeks. She bit her lip when she heard the faint sound of the front door opening and closing.

She was going out. Again. Like she did every night, when she thought everyone else was asleep. She didn't realize that Dawn was awake. Didn't realize that she wasn't keeping her secret as safe as she thought. Dawn had found out almost as soon as it started.

She closed her eyes, and counted in her head. When she got to a hundred, she stood up, wiped her tears on the sleeve of her shirt, opened her door, moved

silently toward the stairs, tiptoeing so that the other occupants of the house wouldn't hear her, and slowly went down them, making sure to skip the steps that creaked with practiced ease.

She ignored her shoes, which sat to the side of the door, and instead reached behind them to grab the extra pair of socks she kept there, before kneeling down and pulling them on over the ones she already wore. They would keep her feet warm, and muffle any noise she made. She knew how good Slayer hearing was.

She also knew that her sister was never really in her right mind when she went on these midnight excursions. She wouldn't be caught. She never was.

Then she grabbed her black sweatshirt off the coat rack, kept there for just this occasion, draped it over her arm, and left the house, closing the door with a soft click behind her.

She started off down the sidewalk, tugging her arms through the sleeves of the sweatshirt, zipping up the front, and pulling up the hood and tucking her hair into it as she went. Then she bowed her head, stuck her hands in the big front pocket of the sweatshirt, and worried the small ring she wore on her index finger, twisting and turning it as she walked the now familiar route.

She'd found it on the floor in her mom's room, when they were moving Willow and Tara's stuff in. She'd never seen it before, and had hidden it in her pocket before either of the two other girls could notice. For

some reason, she wanted to keep it secret.

It was a simple gold-colored band with a green heart set in the middle, with little swirls wrapped around it. She wasn't sure if any of it was real or not, and it was just a little small on her finger, and left a faint mark when she took it off, but she didn't care. It had once belonged to her mother, more personal than any photo, and that was all that mattered.

She paused glanced around warily when she thought she'd heard something following her, but it turned out that it was just a leaf skittering on the sidewalk, swept along by the wind. She shivered from the cold and quickened her pace.

She paused, as she always did, when she reached the edge of the forest. But it only took a moment to steel her nerves and continue down the almost nonexistent path that she knew her sister had followed only a few minutes ahead of her.

The trek through the forest always seemed to take the longest, of her whole journey. Leaves rustled, imitating footsteps, branches shifted and creaked ominously in the wind, and owls hooted mournfully to themselves. The forest was never silent. She imagined eyes gleaming at her out of the darkness between the trees, glimpsed shadowed things moving in the corner of her eye, making freeze and turn.

But there was never anything there. Nothing leapt out at her with bared teeth or claws. The forest was never silent, but neither was it as dangerous as her imagination made it out to be. What seemed like

hours lasted only minutes.

She stopped just a few feet back from where the trees ended in a small clearing, behind a tree, her hand on the rough bark as she silently peered out from behind it, her hood pulled low to conceal her in the shadows.

A cloud covered the moon, dimming the light shed on the lonely clearing, only allowing enough light to illuminate the small, shadow-wreathed shape, immobile in the damp morning grass. The wind swept through the trees, chilling Dawn through her thin jacket, and the cloud was slowly pushed away, allowing more moonlight to penetrate the darkness of the almost morning, revealing first a bouquet of wilted flowers, then the gravestone on which they sat, and, finally, the secretly fragile figure of her sister, kneeling in front of it.

Her hair, turned shadowed and grey in the darkness, hung from her bowed head and hid her face. She sat on her knees, slowly filling in the words carved into the gravestone with the dirt she had scooped up in front of her. She traced each letter, pushing the soil in, so that the words appeared darker than before.

Almost dark enough to be made out in the darkness.

After a few minutes, she paused, lifted her head, her tear-streaked face visible for the first time that night, and gently took the wilted flowers off the gravestone, setting them on her lap. Then she slowly scooped out a long, shallow hole in the dirt beside her, and laid the flowers in it, before pushing the dirt back over them and patting it down, before replacing them with a small bundle of wildflowers that had before been out

of sight on her other side.

Then she just sat, her hands resting on her knees, and bowed her head once more.

Dawn shifted farther back into the shadows, knowing that she would have to leave soon if she didn't want to be caught. After sparing her sister one last glance, she turned and left as silently as she had come, her pace quicker than when she had first traveled through the dark forest.

She arrived back at their house with time to spare, and had no trouble sneaking back up to her room. She unzipped her jacket and set it on her desk, then sat on her bed to remove the four socks she wore. She tossed the one pair in the direction of her closet where the dirty laundry went, and the other went under her desk so they weren't in the way.

Then she crawled under the covers and lay there, just staring up at the ceiling, waiting. The soft, almost silent click of the front door opening announced her sister's arrival a few minutes later. Dawn rolled over onto her side so that she was facing away from the door, shut her eyes, curled her arms under her head, and pretended to be asleep.

The door to her room slowly opened not a minute later, her sister checking in on her to make sure she was okay. Dawn allowed herself a small, soft smile. "Goodnight, Dawn." She heard her whisper, her words no more than a breath. A few moments later, the door shut again with a small click, and she strained her ears to catch her sister's soft footfalls as she went

back to her own room down the hall. As soon as she heard her door shut, she rolled back onto her back and starred up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

She would keep her sister's secret. She gently pulled the ring off her finger and held it above her, trying to get the dim light from the streetlight outside her window to catch on it. She turned it over in her hands, feeling the smoothness of the band, and the hollow part underneath the heart, as she replayed in her mind the sight of the gravestone, and the words that were carved into it, darkened by the disturbed grave soil beneath it.

Buffy Anne Summers

1981—2001

Beloved sister, devoted friend,

She saved the world, a lot.

"Goodnight, Buffy." She whispered softly, before slowly drifting off to sleep.

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